

Safe spaces for adolescent girls in Haiti

Haiti Adolescent Girls Network

In the wake of the 2010 earthquake, adolescent girls in Haiti became increasingly responsible for caring for their younger siblings and for earning an income. Over two years later, girls living in IDP camps and other relocation sites, particularly those without parents, remain vulnerable to violence, and offering sex for food and/or for shelter is not uncommon.

Responding to reports that there was negligible programming for adolescent girls, a number of national NGOs, international organisations and their Haitian affiliates, and local women's groups created the Haiti Adolescent Girls Network (HAGN). Network members aim to maintain safe spaces in which girls regularly meet, find peer mentoring and build skills. This network is designed for collaborative learning and is open to any organisation committed to creating one or more girls-only safe places where, for example, 20-30 girls can meet weekly.

At the Network's outset, many participating organisations had pre-existing youth programmes but all had mixed groups – girls with boys or with women. Girls-only groups have a powerful protective effect; they help ignite friendships, connect young girls with peer mentors, foster a sense of belonging and solidarity,

and give girls a place to turn to in times of trouble. These same spaces are also practical platforms through which to deliver critical new skills. For example, several Network members collaborated to develop an open-source, age-graded financial literacy programme in Creole, with the input of the young girls themselves.

The peer mentors are the programme's driving force. In many settings around the world, peer education often defaults to young people who are better-off; HAGN espouses a different model, which is to engage and foster a cadre of peer mentors aged 18-24 who are from the same communities as the younger programme participants. Peer mentors are not volunteers and must be paid; this reinforces the message that their contribution is valuable and merits the status of a job.

The number of organisations implementing girls-only safe spaces continues to grow. If this approach succeeds, it will help achieve the often-mentioned ambition to 'build back better' in the wake of an emergency.

Jessica Nieradka nieradka.jessica@gmail.com wrote this article with input from Ella Gudwin and Judith Bruce on behalf of the Haiti Adolescent Girls Network.

